



Skip Bennett is a co-owner of Island Creek Oysters.

The oyster is his world



Duxbury man's 'Island Creeks'
have national reputation



Andrew Heinsdadt rotates bags of oysters to loosen silt in order to promote growth.

Oyster farming

Step by step

The entire process takes about 2 years

1. Broodstock chosen and sent to hatchery
2. Hatchery spawns oysters and sends back shipment of seedlings; seedlings are placed in upwellers (bins beneath pier where water is continuously pumped, spurring growth) until they grow large enough (1 1/2 inch) to move to the bay
3. Juvenile oysters placed in loose in the bay
4. Oyster growth monitored; oysters are moved to larger cages as necessary
5. Oysters harvested after attaining market size



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The Patriot Ledger

Standing in the fading afternoon sun on the pier at Duxbury Bay, Skip Bennett opens the package and gently, very gently, unwraps the protective cheesecloth. A smile crosses his face as he extends his arm, displaying about half the contents.

"Check it out," he says with the unmistakable air of a proud father, nodding his head at what looks like glistening grains of sand cupped in the palm of his large hand. "That's about 100,000 of them." Bennett bends down and dips his hand into the seawater, allowing "them" — the tiny oyster seedlings that were freshly delivered from a hatchery in Maine — to slip into the upweller bins that occupy rented space beneath the dock where they will spend the early months of their life before being moved into the bay to grow to market size.

In about two years, the delicate newborns that now sit comfortably in the palm of Bennett's hand, will have matured to a size that would fill the back of an 18-wheeler and to a taste that will

guarantee them a spot on the menus of some of the best seafood restaurants in the country.

The 37-year-old oyster farmer, born and raised in this coastal community, represents the leading edge of a burgeoning part of the state's economy. Aquaculture generates an estimated \$10 million in annual revenue, grows at 10 percent each year, and lies smack dab in the contextual heart of our region's environmental maturation.

Environmental benefits

"This bay is the best front yard a town can have," Duxbury Harbormaster Don Beers says fondly. "And the bay only benefits from a program like this." Beers, a 25-year veteran, is referring to the aquaculture program that allows Bennett and his partner, Christian Horne, to secure rights to public land — and to farm that land for private gain.

"I've always been a bit wary of this," Beers

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"His quality is just superior — size-wise, shell shape, deepness of cup. There are no worries and no mortalities."

— Max Harvey, seafood manager and buyer at Jasper White's Summer Shack in Cambridge on Skip Bennett's oysters



Jenny Lawson and Sido Bennett wash bags of Island Creek oysters at Duxbury Bay.

■ OYSTERS

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continues, as if he knows the next question before it's asked. "Both recreationally and commercially, shellfishermen tend to take and they don't give back. They rely on Mother Nature to rebound on her own.

"But what's so unique about this program is that we're the ones cultivating and we're the ones propagating (the bay). We're taking a barren parcel of land and farming it. We are helping to give back to Mother Nature and we're conspiring to manage the bay and keep it healthy."

Beers is the first stop in the permitting process Bennett and Horne navigated to obtain their respective 3-acre leases just past the mudflats on the bay. That process did not end until the clearance was received from the state Division of Marine Fisheries and the Army Corps of Engineers as well.

And there's no question that the road to approval was smoothed by the environmental benefits Beers alludes to and also the economic benefits — on both the state and local level.

Environmentally, oysters, as filter feeders, play a huge role in reducing the amount of nitrogen buildup in the waters, mostly from nonpoint source pollution — or the runoff of fertilizers and other waste generated near many residential coastal areas. The waters can become so rich in nutrients they promote algal blooms, which can block sunlight from the bottom and smother plant and animal life as it soaks up more than its share of oxygen.



Jenny Lawson handles an oyster growing bag at the Island Creek oyster farm in Duxbury Bay.

not only help cleanse local waters, but also propagate those waters by virtue of mass spawning events. In short, the cultivation enhances the sustainability of the wild population.

"It's not an extractive process," explains Dale Leavitt, the aquaculture and technical coordinator for the Southeastern Massachusetts Aquaculture Center (SEMACE) in Bourne. "It's a sustainable enterprise. It allows for a higher rate of production than the natural system would allow. And in many cases, it is to the benefit of the environment as well."

Not only is the state's aquaculture industry generating close to \$10 million annually (95 percent of which is derived from shellfish farming and half of that is from oyster farming alone), but the economic impact runs deeper than those numbers, according



Oysters start out the size of grains of sand, but within about two years grow to market size.

to Scott Soares, the Aquaculture Coordinator for the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture.

Soares calculates that for every dollar generated from the industry, the total economic impact is \$4.5 million statewide. Bennett and Horne are prime examples in that they not only employ up to a dozen local residents as seasonal and year-round help, but they rent space from the town, pay taxes to the state and regularly spend

money on their growing business.

"We're not fabricating the positive aspects of this industry," Soares says. "A lot of towns employ aquaculture as a management strategy."

A labor of love

This environmentally sound management strategy also happens to be a labor of love for Bennett, who was just out of Merrimack College in North

Andover when he returned to Duxbury with every intention of taking his finance degree to New York in pursuit of a job.

"I told everyone I was just here to make enough money to buy a suit," he laughs. "Well, I guess I'm still looking for that suit." He's still in Duxbury because the process of digging wild mussels and razorclams by hand and selling them to wholesalers for cash quickly led to his first aquaculture experience — the cultivation of hard shell clams on the lease he was granted in 1992. And while a bout with a parasitic quahog disease spurred him to diversify into oysters several years later, in the end he was hooked.

"The real attraction was the independence," Bennett explains. "It's what I love to do, and after a short period of time, I couldn't imagine myself working for somebody else or being in an office. Once I got a taste, it was hard to imagine life any other way. I had to make it work." And it is working extremely well. Bennett and Horne have firmly established themselves as the preeminent oyster farmers on the South Shore. The reputation of their product rivals their competition on the Cape, and their ability to seamlessly mesh with both the community and the environment has been wildly successful.

When Bennett began to add oysters to his lease in 1995, he was not just hedging his bets. While diversification offered some protection from disease, and he knew oysters were worth three to four times more than clams on the open market, he also found them to be more interesting and challenging.

"A clam is a clam," he says. "They

are basically generic and they compete in a very general marketplace. Oysters are simply more appealing to grow. Farming oysters is more like maintaining a vineyard."

Bennett explains that the subtleties in taste vary from oyster to oyster, at least for the discerning customer, and depends on variables including water temperature and quality. He explains that given the raw presentation of the oyster, the size, shape and aesthetic value of the finished product are paramount.

"The best analogy is that a fine-wine drinker is like an educated oyster eater," Horne said. "They may be like, 'mmm, this is more briney, must be a Welfleet.' It's not a radical change in taste from oyster to oyster or from year to year, it's more a subtle difference. An extremely warm summer may mean a slightly more briney taste and a cold summer may mean the oyster is sweeter."

"And it's all very hard work," Bennett says ruefully, shaking his head. "Labor intensive to say the least."

The oyster seedlings Bennett receives from the Maine hatchery are a product of broodstock he carefully chooses from market-size oysters he has grown. He picks the best of the best in terms of size, shape and heartiness and ships them off to Maine where they are spawned.

From the time the return shipment of seedlings is placed in the upwellers beneath the pier, where a motor pumps up to 800 gallons of nutrient-rich seawater over them each minute, to their harvest, each oyster will be personally handled by Bennett or Horne maybe 15 times.

This includes their transference to the lease where the bags and steel mesh cages that house them are periodically lifted out of the water and shaken to break the rough edges off the shells. It includes the painstaking process of constantly distributing and redistributing the oysters so they are not packed too tightly together and so the shells sit on the bottom of the bay as they grow, and not atop one another which can lead to odd-looking and aesthetically unappealing finished products. It includes 12-hour days, breaking through ice in the winter on the way out to the lease, and re-breaking the ice on the way back. And it includes individual examinations of

each oyster, allowing Bennett and Horne to determine the status of size, shape and thickness of shell – in short, whether the product is measuring up to their standards.

And the only sure way to be certain of the quality of the product is to listen to the marketplace's unforgiving voice.

Bennett remembers the person on the other end of the phone having a typical New York, down-to-business gruffness.

"What do you call 'em," growled Sandy Ingber, buyer for the Grand Central Oyster Bar in Manhattan, responding to Bennett's 1997 inquiry as to whether Ingber might be interested in sampling his farmed oysters. "You gotta give 'em a name."



Alex Bezdek, 17, and Liz Vancheri, 18, sort oysters for market. An oyster must be three inches wide to be sold.

Reaching, Bennett thought of the part of town in which he lived. "How about Island Creeks?" "I love it," Ingber said. "Send me 200 tomorrow." Ingber did indeed love it – the name, the sharp, briney taste, the aesthetic quality. The tryout was a success. Ingber was hooked and a brand was born.

On the menu

Today, Island Creeks from Duxbury are a high-end staple at many five-star restaurants, generating as much respect and name recognition as Welfleets and Cotuits from the Cape, Glidden Points from Maine,

Moonstones from Rhode Island, Raspberry Points from Prince Edward Island and Blue Points pulled from the Long Island Sound off coastal Connecticut.

"When you buy Skip's oysters you're like the Maytag repairman," says Patrick Barnes, owner and executive chef of Caffè Bella in Randolph. "There's never going to be any problems." Barnes, whose restaurant was ranked third in the state behind L'Espalier and Aujourd'hui in this year's Zagat's guide, bought his oysters from Wellfleet, Cotuit and Martha's Vineyard when he opened 11 years ago. But the consistent excellence of the Island Creek oyster and the added benefit of personally knowing the supplier made his

decision to do business with Bennett an easy one.

"When you open an oyster, it's like stripping someone naked," he says. "It is what it is and all the flaws are exposed. Skip never has a bad oyster. With farm-raised oysters, you can have continuous control, from seeding to shipping the product."

Equally important, Barnes adds, is the security that comes with intimate knowledge of the waters that house the shellfish he buys. Fully trusting the water quality is just not possible when purchasing wild oysters harvested in mass quantities.

Barnes believes Duxbury Bay has



Island Creek oysters are a favorite with many chefs and diners. Above, Liz Vancheri, 18, savors an Island Creek oyster fresh from Duxbury Bay.

"characteristics that produce the best oysters," pointing specifically to the high water quality and the relatively cool water temperature.

"I love Skip's oysters," says Max Harvey, seafood manager and buyer at Jasper White's Summer Shack in Cambridge. "His quality is just superior — size-wise, shell shape, deepness of cup. There are no worries and no mortalities."

Harvey offers his customers a range of up to half a dozen oysters on a regular basis, considering the Island Creeks to be his high-end offering, while Connecticut's Blue Points represent the more generic end of the scale.

"I have them all the time," Harvey gushes. "They have that sharp, sharp taste and the quality is just so good. Customers, chefs ... anyone who knows anything about oysters, or anyone who has half a brain, would give them a big thumbs up." That kind of high praise for the Island Creeks is obvious in the repeat business Harvey, Barnes and Ingber provide, and fortified by their impressive destination points. Bennett and Horne regularly sell to such luminaries as the Union Café in New York's Greenwich Village, the Union Oyster House in Boston, Azul in Miami, Old Ebbitt Grill in Washington D.C., and Shaw's Crab house in Chicago, among others.

GREG DEER photos/The Patriot Ledger

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Don Beers, Duxbury
harbormaster

Bigger farm, bigger headache

And while it appears that now the world is his oyster, Bennett still looks on his life's work as an evolving process.

"Christian always says the learning curve is vertical," Bennett says of his close friend and partner. "Even at this point we're constantly learning. When you first start out in aquaculture, you basically learn quickly what doesn't work. But now, we have something that truly works for us and every day we learn ways to improve. It gets bigger all the time and it's always a lot of fun."

But Bennett, despite the promise of continued growth and well aware that in addition to his own grant, Beers has received more than 20 lease applications for Duxbury Bay, is realistic about the ultimate scale of his operations.

"You're limited in the amount of acreage you have, but there's also a quality of life issue," he says thoughtfully. "You know, bigger farm means bigger headaches. At some point you become nothing more than a manager and you might as well be selling cars. I don't want that, I want to be out farming and selling and interacting with all kinds of different people."

And much of Bennett's perspective is shaped by the nature of the industry he loves. He knows that despite his experience, wisdom and talent, there are forces of nature well beyond his control that could turn the tide against him in a heartbeat.

"It could all end tomorrow," he says, casually shucking an Island Creek, then tilting it to his mouth so the seawater carries the juicy pearl of meat down his throat. "An oilspill, a storm, a major outbreak of disease ... I understand the amount of risk and you just have to learn to live with it."